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ABSTRACT

Basic writing (BW) programs and teachers are often victims of the various political systems of academia. Administrators seldom devote energy or funds to BW programs and expend little effort to secure qualified faculty for them. BW courses are most frequently taught by part-time faculty, largely in unsupervised situations and without a common syllabus or text. Qualified faculty interested in BW are often denied tenure or are restricted in ranks. The academic community is not ready to confront the reality that BW is a bonafide specialization: tenure and promotion committees refuse to recognize work done in the field, BW classes are assigned the worst facilities, and the administration often intrudes into the scheduling and curricula of BW programs. BW teachers can do six things to fight back: (1) refuse to hire incompetent teachers just to staff sections; (2) refuse to accept second-class status among the ranks of academia; (3) become involved in decision-making committees; (4) ask for the material and personnel that are needed through the proper channels, with proper supportive data, at the proper time; (5) continue to work within their professional organizations; and (6) legitimize BW as an academic specialization by engaging in scholarly and professional activities. (JL)

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The Politics of Basic Writing: Program Administration

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THE POLITICS OF BASIC WRITING: PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Two years ago at another conference I presented a paper on the politics of basic writing as the varicus political systems impacted on BW students. My thesis then was framed by Frost's haunting question in "Mending Wall": one wonders what we are walling out and what we are walling in. While I am still concerned about many of those issues I raised two years ago, I wish to address a different aspect of my title this year. Specifically, I want to examine the ways that BW programs and BW teachers are often victims of the various political systems of academia. In brief, we are treated as the step-children of the system, partially through the vagaries of the system and partially through our own fault for not learning how to manipulate the system to our own advantage.

Perhaps an analogy will set the stage for my comments. You may be familiar with the name Theodore Bikel, an accomplished musician and Broadway star. At one stage of his career, many years ago, Bikel toured the country giving guitar concerts. His opening gambit was always the same. He would come on stage, smile shyly at the audience, and proceed to tune his guitar. He would twang a string or two, produce several highly discordant notes, make a few adjustments, twang a string or two again, shrug and say, "Oh well, I guess that's good enough for a guitar picker." Then he would begin his highly professional concert before an audience certainly aware of his abilities as a musician and certainly not ready to accept "guitar picking." No one expected anything less of him, in spite of his suggestion that guitar music was less than serious stuff and that audiences at guitar concerts didn't know about or didn't deserve the very best.

Sometimes I think that we borrow a portion of Bikel's opening act, making "good enough for guitar pickers" to read "good enough for BW students." And our administrations often word it "good enough for BW teachers." "It's good

enough for BW" expresses an ttitude that has become an escape goat for everything from mediocrity to outright ineptness in teaching and managing BW programs. The attitude assumes that neither teachers nor students deserve sound programs and quality teaching, that they, like Bikel's facetious comment about guitar audiences, are second class and will settle for less than that which they really deserve.

BW teachers and programs continue to be treated as something apart from the mainstream of education. While administrators often admit the worth of BW programs, they seldom devote either energies or funds to support them in a meaningful manner. To use a thesis from my paper of two years ago, they are more concerned about "walling out" those academically unprepared students, protecting the academic integrity of main-line courses.

Staffing is a major area where we see the "good enough for BW" syndrome at work. Although much progress has been made during the last decade in exploring writing methodologies, including BW methodologies, little effort is expended to secure qualified faculty for these courses. In the majority of instances those assigned BW courses are simply the newest faculty on the staff and have no training or real interest in BW. They were hired as Assistant Professors of Literature and simply must teach some BW courses on their way to tenure and promotion. In other instances the bulk of BW classes are assigned to part-time faculty since no one else wants to teach them.

I know one community college that especially prides itself on the intensity with which it interviews candidates for full-time job appointments. Their interview process takes two full days, involving a large number of faculty, counsellors, and administrators, and is, indeed,quite effective. Their full-time faculty is quite outstanding. However, according to my statistics, that same college staffs 82% of its BW courses with part-time faculty who have virtually no training at all, just anyone available at

the time the course is scheduled. The dean has admitted to me that most of them are, "expletive deleted."

Indeed, the abuse of part-time faculty is most readily seen in English departments and most especially at the level of BW. Although NCTE has adapted guidelines on hiring and using part-time faculty, they are seldom followed. In my most recent review of BW programs at several colleges, two-year and four-year, I found that approximately 60% of all BW courses were being taught by part-time faculty, largely in unsupervised situations. They had no common syllabus and no common text. A review of materials being used in those classes indicated that fully 20% of them were actually being taught as literature courses. After all, that is the area in which most of the faculty have expertise.

And the problems of securing qualified faculty members is not contained solely by the part-time situation. In those instances where there are highly competent faculty seriously interested in BW, they are often denied tenure appointments or are restriced in rank.

For two years now I have been carefully studying CHE and have found some alarming facts:

*Less than 15% of all BW writing positions offered tenure track appointments. Most were one-three year terminal assignments.

*When possible salary was mentioned, BW positions averaged approximately $6000 less than appointments at the same rank for literature teachers.

*Many announcements were obviously intended to fill needs in literature programs and, almost incidentally, to get someone to teach BW. My favorite of these was a recent ad which read something like this: In bold fact: "Basic Writing Vacancy." Beneath this: "The candidate selected will have (1) formal course work and/or experience in teaching composition and BW, (2) traing in ESL, and (3) experience teaching medieval literature." Now, some of

my best professional friends are medievalists. From a rather large group, I know of only one with any experience or interest in BW.

A few months ago I appeared before the Budget Council of our university to request a new budget line for an additional BW teacher. I was prepared for the usual intense questioning: what was student demand for courses, what was present student-teacher ratio, what was pool for qualified candidates, what was my anticipated salary range for the position, etc. I was not prepared for what did happen. Five senior members of that powerful council pressed me the entire time, wanting to know why I needed to spend so much money to get someone to teach BW. "You can find dozens of unemployed high school teachers who can do that," they said. When I explained that those high school teachers might be qualified to teach introductory literature courses but not BW, they didn't understand. One member asked, "Don't you just teach things like subject=verb agreement? Anyone can do that."

We are simply not yet ready, as an academic community, to confront the reality that BW is a bonafide specialization and to recognize it and reward it accordingly.

I could relate stories, now all too familiar, of tenure and promotion committees which have refused to recognize work done in the area of BW as valid criteria for either retention or promotion. I know highly competent teachers, some with names you would recognize should I use them, who have been denied tenure and/or promotion because they work rather exclusively in BW. These people speak at our conference, publish in our journals, and, in some instances, consult nationwide. But they do not research bird imagery in Keats or nominalization in Chaucer. They are not quite real members of the fraternity of English teachers.

And just as there are political implications in staffing our BW classes, so there are also political implication in providing those courses with appropriate facilities and adequate support services.

Every term on of our BW classes gets scheduled into S-114. Now S-114 is essentially a closet, cordoned off from a science lab. It is noisy and at best could seat eight or ten students. The science teachers don't use it because it is too small, and they say they can't teach because of the talk going on in the lab, just a half-wall partition away. Every term we get schedule there; every term I have to explain to the dean's office that if it isn't good enough for a science classroom, it isn't good enough for a BW classroom either. Something about guitar pickers rings in my mind everytime I confront this task.

A friend of mine teaches BW in a small classroom whose most immediate prior use was for storage. Boxes still line the walls. Before that it was a biology lab. The students who are there must work on slate-topped lab desks, complete with sinks and gas jets. The dean said it was ok for BW students.

On another campus everyone was excited by the prospect of getting new student desks for the fall term. The old ones had arms missing, broken backs, or no backs at all. Every classroom did get new desks, every classroom, that is, except the four used rather exclusively for BW classes. They were given "the best" of the salvaged chairs from the other rooms.

While science labs are usually beneficiares of adequate equipment funds, BW labs, so essential to valid programs, receive little or no funding. Last year when I requested something so elementary as a new file cabinet for the lab, I was awarded a World War II vintage edition from the Provost's office. At least five other departments were given shiney new models. Overhead and opaque projectors we requisition on a day-to-day basis from media services while other departments have them sitting unsued in their

offices. Money for sets of books or materials is virtually nonexistent. We run our program with copies of books and materials that are donated, left-over is perhaps a better term, from faculty around campus. While other departments have equipment budgets, we must go to the dean and plea bargain for something so simple as a cassette recorder. Other departments have been awarded funds for computers; we are told we must write a proposal and see if we can get funded.

Our students pay the same price per hour as do all other students on campus. But the BW program does not enjoy the same funding formulas used to support other departments.

And a final concern is the manner in which the administration often intrudes into scheduling and curricula matters of BW programs. I know one campus where all BW classes are scheduled at the undesirable hours of 8 o'clock in the morning or after 2 in the afternoon. The department chair explains that the popular time slots have to be reserved for the main-line courses.

It is seldom that the administration of a college would suggest to a chemistry department that it could not offer a course in qualitative analysis or that it must immediately begin teaching a new course in drug chemistry. Nor would the administration think of suggesting course content or methodology. But everyone is a specialist in writing--or so we have been told. Administrations attempt to control course offerings and, even more dangerous, to mandate content and methodology.

I know one administrator who issued an order that all BW courses must include "a major unit on use of the apostrophe." On another campus it

is required by administrative fiat that all BW students purchase a thesaurus. They need not use it, mind you, just buy it and show proof of purchase on the first formal meeting of the class.

What can we do about the various problems that I have reviewed today? How can we begin to exercise our individual and collective clout? In I'll Take My Stand, the collective agrarian manifesto published in 1930, Andrew Lytle has an essay entitled "The Hind Tit." In that essay he argues cogently that the South has been pushed aside, fed little and nurtured less, that it has become the runt of the litter. He also suggests that the South might be itself partially to blame for its economic and social status. And Lytle was probably right.

I see a distinct comparison between what Lytle argued was the hind-tit status of the South and what I see as the second-class status of BW teachers and programs. We have been too long pushed to the hind tit of academia, underpaid, overworked, and ill appreciated. But all of this can change.

I grew up in the agrarian South, and I well remember my dog Muffin. I recall one litter of pups that she had when I was about nine years old. In true fashion the smallest pup was pushed to the hind tit and often shoved away from that by his healthy and aggressive brothers and sisters. But this time the runt, we called him Shorty, had that rare thing: fight. Although he was small, he dared to chew the tails and legs of the other pups, tried to drag them away so he could get his share of milk. Sure, Shorty got abused and bruised in return, but he always came back for more. And he hollared a lot. When he didn't get enough mother's milk, he howled--loudly. And over a two-three week period I watched as Shorty became his mother's favorite. I watched Muffin push otehr pups away to

give Shorty his milk. I watched her snap at the agressive children when they attacked her favorite. Shorty grew healthy and strong because he dared to fight back and refused to succomb to the hind tit.

So must we. Unlike Shorty, we may never become the dean's favorite, but we have to fight. We have to hollar a lot about injustices, both to ourselves and our students. And we probably also have to nibble at some of our colleagues too. It is not always a happy task. But the stakes are high: survival and self respect.

What specifically can we do? Several things:

First, we must purify our own ranks. Those of us who are administrators must refuse to hire incompetent teachers just to staff sections. We must explain to the dean that we cannot offer those classes because we have no one to teache them. Those of us who are teachers must observe other BW teachers and be prepared to suggest their lack of sensitivity and/or training when that is obvious. Remember that as a lot we are judged by the worst of our group. We cannot complain about inept work when we refuse to assume the responsibility to identify and attack it.

Second, we must refuse to accept second-class citizenship among the ranks of academia. When given totally inadequate facilities or equipment, we, like Shorty, must hollar. When given unrealistic schedules just because we teach BW, we must complain to our chairs, our deans, our unions. To acquiesce is to establish a pattern.

Third, we must become involved on the decision-making committees of our institutions. Too often BW teachers are so overworked that they have little time or energy left to serve on curriculum committees, budget councils, media boards, etc. But we must find the time and the energy to make ourselves heard in the appropriate political arenas.

Fourth, we must begin to ask for what we need--media materials, books, supplies, student aides, etc.--through proper channels, with proper supportive data, at proper times. We must bombard our chairs and deans with reasonable and justified requests, not just in hallway meetings, but in formally impressive reports.

Fifth, we must continue to work within this organization and NCTE to make our requests, our needs, and our fears known. We must appear on programs, submit resolutions, and generally make our presence felt. Since NCTE is the single body with authority to establish a task force, usually for a working period of three years, to investigate a special problem and propose solutions, I urge that we petition NCTE to establish such a task force to investigate some of the exact matters related to BW that I have addressed today.

And, finally, the most obvious and most important of all: we must continue to study ourselves, reviewing methodologies, reading journals, examining texts, attending meetings. Our political message will have no impact unless our own academic credentials are sound.

Audiences still attend guitar concerts and demand professionalism from the artist. Shorty lived a long and happy life and went to dog heaven nearly two decades ago. We are still teaching basic writing --with seventy-five papers to read for next Monday morning, with inadequate equipment and supplies, and with no solid administrative support --because we, for too long, have been too timerous.